

RE: DEITY - THE BREATH OF CREATION

2.7 Interlude: The Dao Progenitor

The boy's name was Xing. Xing Wu, one of the Young Masters of the Xing clan, built and flourishing among the outer edges of Pangaea, just barely outside the reach of the Celestial Palace. And he had never faced a hardship in his life. Not like some had.

In all twenty years of his life he'd had everything handed to him on a silver platter, and not just because he'd been born the son of a noble family. He was weak, physically, even if he was exceedingly talented in qi cultivation. Elixirs had been poured down his throat, medicinal pills and skilled doctors prescribing treatments to overcome his frail constitution; but nothing seemed to work. Spending too much time outside exhausted him. Too much exercise could make him sick for weeks at a time – even merely walking the gardens could be strenuous, if he was having a bad day.

What a pity. The servants would whisper as he walked by. *A fragile flower, gifted in cultivation, but unable to bloom.*

Must be a quirk of his body. Cultivating high enough should cure his ails. The doctors would say, shaking their heads.

A fragment of bad karma. It must be, though I cannot see it. The one Karae his parents had tasked with looking at him had said.

What a cruel punishment from the gods. The priests of the Church of the All-Heaven said, bowing their heads in prayer for him. *To be born in a clan of warriors, yet unable to wield a sword.* His parents weren't sure that it was such a curse, though. They seemed happy enough to keep him out of the training grounds, and away from any harm.

Xing Wu sighed to himself as he stared out of the large, pane-glass window, his legs crossed lotus-style as he sat atop a plush, red-velvet cushion. Stacks of books and scrolls surrounded him; as he was physically frail, he felt it prudent to hone his mind – he could serve the clan as a scholar, or something similar. With his talent in qi cultivation he could even become fairly powerful...but it felt...unfulfilling.

He had everything he could ever want. Anything he could ask for he would get – booze, money, books, even women; though he had not partaken in that last one – such was the weight of his parents' words. Such was the weight of his grandfather's doting presence; the one true immortal of the Xing clan.

It was nothing but stifling. Because what he wanted, even if he couldn't put it into words, no one could give him.

Xing Wu met her on a small trip. His parents had arranged for him to travel the clan lands in preparation for an important guest as a result. It wasn't necessary for him to travel to such a little village, not but a day's travel by carriage from the main compound, but he had requested some time to travel beyond the walls – as a Heart-Level cultivator, even frail as he was, his magic was powerful enough to forestall any threats that might come near. Not that there were any spirit beasts in the area.

Letting out a breath, Xing Wu stepped out of the carriage and observed the village. To call it a village though was a bit generous. Twelve houses of decent quality, each large enough to hold multiple generations of families, were built in a half-circle, terraces of rice stretching into the hills. Smoke rose from the houses, even as the elders and other peoples began to approach. Armored guards moved to assist Xing Wu as he carefully descended the steps of the carriage to the ground, his light purple robes flowing easily as he strode forward, slowly, but with purpose. He could not afford to show weakness, not even to these simple folk.

He was of the Xing Clan. That meant strength.

So he greeted the town's leaders, talked cordially with them, even if they were deferential, and spoke of their crops and harvests and the weight of taxes upon them. And when he exited the village chief's house – a compound to them, but little more than a shack to him – already feeling a bit woozy from the excitement, he saw her.

She appeared simple. Her hair was brown. Her face dirty from working in the field. Her smock simple and plain, yet when their eyes met it was as if he had been blinded by the light of the sun. They were brown, but they shone with a pure white light only he could see – and his knees collapsed beneath him, coughs wracking his body as he doubled over, coughing blood.

“Young Master Xing!” One of the guards shouted, rushing forward. He held up a hand to stop him, desperate to control himself as he continued to cough. Even in front of these simple folk, he had to show as much strength as possible, and to be aided by a guard in this moment would be a shame too many. A gentle hand laid itself upon his back, warmth flooding through his body, and his hacking immediately ceased, his lungs clear of pain. His gaze snapped upward, back to the woman, who watched him with a mixture of surprise and concern. It was not love he had felt, he didn't think. So what in the world was that?

His gaze sharpened as his qi moved, quickly peering into the girl's cultivation...only to find she was as simple of a mortal as they came. Xing Wu straightened and wiped his mouth with a napkin he pulled from his robes, soothing his guards and the villagers with a few soft words.

Yet even as he left, his mind kept going back to the light, and that woman.

Xing Wu found himself constantly travelling back to that little village, his curiosity peaked. And most of the time he spent speaking with the woman. He wasn't sure what drew him to her. Was it love? He wasn't sure. But there was a surety about her that attracted him to her; she knew exactly who and what she was. Even if that was a simple village girl, tending to her herb garden and living outside of town. His parents, noticing his newfound interest in the girl, offered to make her a servant in their house.

He couldn't help but be relieved when she declined the offer, with his assurances that nothing ill would come of it. He would hate to remove her from her home – if he were to liken it to the poetry he'd read, it would be akin to removing a flower from its garden. Beautiful for a time, but would quickly wither. Though he wondered if that was truly the only reason, or if it was something else. Something more akin to what he felt; to try and force the servant position upon her would be contrary to her purpose. Her being.

And bless her heart, she tried to help him whenever he felt ill during his visits.

“What kind of man were you, to have earned such karma?” she would wonder, mixing a tonic for him, and he'd just laugh, unsure how to answer. And they would chat, play card games, and talk of little things. Him of stories and histories he had read. Her, of the lives of mortals, and of homes and the warmth of hearths. The topic made his heart yearn for...something. His home did not feel like a true home. The servants and such respected him, but there were none who treated him as a human. To the servants, he was someone far above them, both in status and cultivation.

To his parents, he was something fragile. A flower kept in a vase, that might shatter if touched. They loved him in their own way, but...it drove him mad, the more he learned and thought about it. Yet what could he do? He was fragile. His body fought against him. And there was nowhere for him to go.

“I finally found you.” The woman from the Celestial Palace said, smiling to herself. She was beautiful, with long blonde hair and large, white wings that marked her as an Avian. Xing Wu stared at her blankly, his hand lying on the crystal orb she had produced. It shone with a silver glow, reacting to something within him – not qi, but something else. His parents sat beside him, watching curiously, while his Immortal grandfather sat across from the woman; Allana, she called herself. She had come here to visit his grandfather, supposedly, and speak of the Celestial Palace's growing influence, alongside the potential fate of the Xing clan.

Yet her words were heard by no one else in the room but Xing Wu.

“What does this mean?” his grandfather asked, gesturing to the orb.

“Oh, it’s a simple little test that measures one’s compatibility to another. Not on a qi level, but on a karmic and soul level. His talent is more than satisfactory, and the light from the orb shows his compatibility to be more than enough.” Alanna explained, folding her hands in her lap. Despite being in the presence of an immortal she showed no signs of intimidation; as expected of an envoy from the Celestial Palace. “With your blessing, I would propose an alliance.”

“An alliance?” Xing Wu’s grandfather asked, raising one bushy, white eyebrow.

“Through marriage. The Celestial Empress has yet to select a suitor, and with his talent, background, and compatibility, young Xing Wu here has the potential to become one of her consorts. Perhaps even become the Emperor if he plays his cards right, and manages to achieve immortality.” Alanna stated, never losing her smile. His grandfather stroked his beard in seeming thought, humming to himself as he began to question the woman on her intentions. But Xing Wu knew what was coming. This would be the one thing he would not have a choice in; there was no doubt in anyone’s minds that their clan would eventually be forced to join the Celestial Palace as they sought to unify all of Pangaea, in the name of the late first Emperor, Dei.

Xing Wu becoming the consort of the current Empress would boost their status within the Palace immensely, perhaps even provide his own grandfather with resources that would boost his immortal cultivation. Xing Wu sat back as he listened to Alanna promise only the best doctors and resources to boost his constitution, all the while shooting excited, joyful glances his way. But all he was hearing was that he’d be exchanging one gilded cage for another. This time with more responsibilities attached.

I finally found you. He wondered. What did that mean?

The time of his departure was drawing near, and Xing Wu reminisced. Ever since his parents had agreed to Alanna's terms, he had not been allowed to leave the clan compound. He'd hardly been allowed to leave his room – they couldn't risk anything happening to him, not before the delegation from the Celestial Palace took him back to Manu Ti, their capital city and seat of the current Empress. His hands clenched into fists.

He wouldn't be able to see the woman in the village again. He'd be surrounded by thousands and thousands of servants and doctors and people bowing and scraping to earn his approval...and he'd have to do the same, to survive what he could only imagine was a fierce political battleground. Including to some woman he'd never met, the most powerful woman in all of Pangaea. Which was fine, he supposed, arranged marriages weren't uncommon and he'd half been expecting one for a while now, but...it was sitting with him wrong. Many things were, if he was being honest with himself. Was this it? Was this all he was meant for? To be doomed to be a frail-bodied consort? A flower in a vase?

No, that wasn't the right way to think about this. This was a noble path. It was a duty-bound path; he could see it, practically. The shadow of himself, heading to the Celestial Palace, becoming a noble, becoming immortal, working through politics and cultivation alike...it felt like a path he had tread before. And something within him began to rage against it.

It happened just before he was about the leave; a mere hour beforehand, actually.

He had taken one last walk around the outside of the compound, burning it into his memory. Not that at his cultivation level he'd ever be able to forget; but nostalgia compelled him. The journey to the Celestial Palace would supposedly only take a month or two thanks to the advanced flying carriage Alanna used, but he doubted he'd be able to see the compound again anytime in the next few centuries. A sigh escaped him as he stared up at an apple tree, its golden fruits, twisted in color thanks to overexposure to metal qi, glinting in the light of the realm sun.

That was when *it* opened.

A rift. A hole in reality, torn open with a hiss of air and a howl of wind. It was maybe the size of his head, and it *poured* out a foul miasma that burned his skin just to be near. His robes whipped in the fell wind that tore out of the hole, something with dark scales and darker claws skittering around the edges. His qi roiled at the sight, instincts screaming at him to jump away, back away – yet his legs stayed in place. Shouts of alarm echoed behind him. He could feel his Grandpa's qi rise, right alongside Alanna's – to his surprise, it absolutely dwarfed his grandfather's.

Even above him, he heard a new voice. A golden light shining down from above, warning him to back away from the hole, that it was not supposed to be messed with. It wondered why it was here, and proclaimed itself as his guardian.

Yet still he stayed. Everything around him screamed for him to flee, yet he could sense darkness and danger within that hole. He saw it in how the ground before the crack in the air blackened and faded, and some part of him bid him stay. Do not flee. Do not run. Not one single step. That some irreplicable part of him would die if he backed down now.

And this gave whatever lay within that rift enough time to reach out, snag him, and pull him out of the Physical Realm entirely, sealing the hole shut behind it.

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

Xing Wu fought for his life. Darkness surrounded him, shadows of all kinds pressing into his vision and mind with increasing frequency. Whatever had grabbed him had let him run free, distracted as it was by a bolt of golden light that had been hurled at it, and allowing him a chance to escape – for it was far too powerful for him, and whatever arrogance had bid his legs to stay firm had vanished. So he ran for his life, through the darkness and shadows.

His constitution failed him more than once, blood spilling from his lips and consciousness wavering. The Qi here was dense, and dark, tainting his own qi whenever he tried to absorb it; so he didn't. He kept his qi quiet and hid and recovered as best he could, but monsters continually found him, never giving him more than a moment's rest.

Spiders of shadow leapt at him with fangs bared, poison dripping from their maws. Hounds of darkness harried his every step, keeping him from resting for too long. And true beings of living shadow clawed at his mind, trying to eat away at his sanity. Blasts of fire and light warded them off but only for so long; whenever he struck one down or evaded some, another was there to take its place.

For months he ran about, winding through narrow corridors and open caverns, feeling his way through the darkness – and he'd never felt so alive. Injuries criss-crossed his body, his robes were tattered, and he hadn't slept once since he'd arrived in this fresh hell. It was him, versus the world. No duties. Nothing to keep him constrained. Limited only by the strength of his own body, soul, and qi. Strength surge through him with each obstacle overcome. Each ascension trial, be it heavenly lightning or burning fire, that managed to find him in this hidden realm only served to temper his body and soul, driving the weakness he'd been plagued with since birth from his body.

Xing Wu laughed as he battled with one of the giant spiders, using one of its severed limbs as a spear. A fire burned in his soul, and no amount of shadow could douse it.

He wasn't sure how long he spent in that hidden realm. Years, at least. Decades, easily. But he travelled far and wide within it. Beyond the realms of shadow to ones of fire, lightning, ice, and more, each with their own dangers. Each with their own intricacies. Not all had full animals within them, some being barren spots of ridiculously pure qi. Yet each spot helped him. He absorbed the elements into his body, chasing away some of the weakness that plagued his constitution...although, that, he figured, was not the source of his strength. He could feel it, almost. The closer he got to his own soul, the closer he got to his own desire, the stronger he became.

He drew a character on the ground with a stick, his qi coating the wood so it could carve itself into stone.

“Dao.” It was a word he had heard before, in the scrolls and books he'd read as a child. The closer he got to his own Dao, the stronger he became...almost as if the disconnect between soul and mind had been causing his physical weakness. Xing Wu flexed his arms as he stood, his purple robes long

since having been discarded for furs he'd cut off of a particularly mean frost bear. His muscles bulged, shiny scars crisscrossing the flesh.

He was a step away from being immortal, in both qi and body, by now. But he had yet to take that final step. Something instinctual held him back, kept him away from it; he had to do this right, or not at all. Or it would be worth nothing.

So heavy were his thoughts he didn't notice when the tunnel he had been in gave way to a large cave filled with flowers, a giant root stretching from one end of the wall to the other, with a woman dressed in black at the very end chained to the wall.

"Once more you find your way to me. It took you long enough. And to think, I went to all that effort to open a hole in the hidden realm and lead you here, only for you to keep a lady waiting. Disrespectful." The woman taunted, startling him out of his reverie. She had opened that hole...? Xing Wu swallowed thickly as he met the woman's eyes, the evil smile that stretched across her face promising pain – and that was when her aura hit him. He fell to his knees, darkness and depression weighing themselves upon him, threatening to push him into the dirt and never let up. "Without your memories, I wonder how you will fare this time?" she cackled.

You think yourself strong? His mind whispered. Your worth is only in your duty to your clan. Your value is only in your marriage to the Empress. You have responsibilities, and you are abandoning them.

Xing Wu struggled. He raged. And, finally, he accepted those thoughts. Not wholly, but...enough to let him pull himself into a sitting position and take a breath. Those were his duties. Those were his responsibilities...and if he didn't do them, what would happen? He had to sacrifice himself, for the betterment of others. Sacrifice his own happiness...

His eyes opened as he slowly rose to his feet. The problem wasn't that his only worth lay in those duties. It lay within his sense of duty, towards those who had raised him. The face of the woman from the village flashed through his mind. A home...he didn't even know what that was anymore.

He'd thrived in chaos. He'd arguably thrived in his clan, even if it felt like a cage. But...but. He wasn't sure. He did know this, however.

Having his doubts pulled so ruthlessly to the front of his mind only hardened his resolve. And he could no longer stay away from his duties, leaving them unresolved.

"Thank you," he said, bowing to the woman, limbs still trembling from the pressure. She scowled at him and turned her head away.

"Begone. I don't want to see you any longer. Damnable fool." She cursed. He kept his head bowed as he backed out of the cave, the entryway sealing shut as he left. Only when he was certain he had escaped did he let out a breath. It was time to return. The only question was how to get out.

It took him another few years to find a way out of the hidden realm, and he only found it by luck. A giggle. A gust of wind. A flash of a fox tail, and he emerged in an all-too-familiar location.

Merely a few hours from his clan compound, and the little village he'd once frequented so often. Xing Wu felt his hands twitch. Even if he had changed so much, he could go straight to the clan. He could leave for the Celestial Palace...but instead he visited the village. He had questions. Something in his soul needed a question to be answered by someone he suspected was not as simple as he'd first imagined; only, she wasn't there. Xing Wu frowned as he entered her empty cottage, seeming untouched for years. And, upon the kitchen table, was a message wrought in silver light.

Come to the Celestial Palace if you want to see her again.

Xing Wu saw red.

His path was a warpath. Trees trembled before him as he charged through the lands, flying over cities, ignoring the ruckus he caused as he hurled himself through the skies, chasing the dream of a woman. It didn't matter if what he felt for her was love or not; his attention to her had caused her to be kidnapped by the Celestial Palace, and by Alanna. Who were they to take an innocent woman? His fury grew, and then the city of Manu Ti came into view.

Twenty islands flew over a truly massive lake, its waters gleaming in the light of the Realm Sun. Great iron chains anchored the floating islands to the shoreline, each easily as wide as a mountain; while cultivators of all kinds flew about or moved in the myriad cities below or on the islands themselves. The auras of innumerable immortals rose at his presence; clearly hostile as it was, battle-intent soaring into the sky. Xing Wu found he did not care. His teeth were bared as the first hurtled at him; a Karae, not yet an immortal, who was struck down with a backhand. The ease with which he countered the being surprised even him.

Ten Immortals started to surge out of the city, only to be quieted by a towering pillar of light that rose from the center palace. The true Celestial Palace. Xing Wu clenched his hands into fists, his cultivation bubbling, surging, roaring to be let free. To activate the immortality ascension trial and give himself the power to challenge this person, the Empress who was the source of that light. Yet he knew that mere qi or fleshly cultivation wouldn't be enough to challenge her. He needed something else. Something undefeatable.

He stepped forward, and a bridge of glass appeared before him. There was no gust of qi. No surge of wind. No great bell of power – simply, a bridge of glass. His first step upon it was easy.

His second was not.

Who are you? The bridge demanded. Xing Wu did not have an answer. *What do you stand for?* It asked. He did not have an answer for that, either. Yet still he walked; through the doubt, through the questions, through the increasing pressure that threatened to send him tumbling from the bridge of glass; he walked. Because to stop would be to admit defeat. And he was anything but beaten.

I am who I am. He answered. *I stand for what I believe in. And what I believe in, is me. In a world filled with uncontrolled variables, I alone am the thing I can control.* Each step became stronger, and with it, came memories. Of being a fisherman. Of being a slave, then a scholar, unable to discern the truth of things. Of being a leader and ruler, burdened by responsibility...they were all him. Yet none of them were. He was Xing Wu. The return of his memories of all his past lives did nothing to change that. It was no grand revelation. No great change in heart. Simply the unveiling of his past, a thing he already knew.

He was who he was. And who he was, was in the now, not the past.

And the moment his foot hit the end of the bridge, he finally had a true answer for what had been plaguing him his entire life.

A silent question, he hadn't even known was being asked.

Xing Wu let out a breath and looked heavenward, a wry smile gracing his lips. "I hate you." He said, not unkindly, then turned his attention back down to the mortal world. His senses were expanding, visions of the spiritual gradually increasing...and he could sense the woman he'd come chasing after, somewhere far below, living in a little village near one of the great chains. She was safe. There were no guards around her, and while he'd have to go check up on her, there was another matter to deal with first.

Alanna stood before him in the sky, flanked by guards in gleaming golden armor. Her white robes fell about her like a pool, and a crown of gold rested atop her finely done hair. He recognized her, memories still flooding back to him.

"Alanna. How did you find me?" He asked, images of a little avian girl trailing after him overlapping the visage of the noble ruler before him. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes, but he felt no pity for her. She...had done well, hadn't she?

"I knew you'd come back." She said, voice cracking. Xing Wu paused, memories still returning. He had questions. But first and foremost -

"Marriage, Alanna? Really?" He asked, raising an eyebrow at her. She had the decency to blush in embarrassment, breaking the mask of the noble rule for just a moment. He continued. "Why did you kidnap the girl?"

"It was the easiest way to get your parents to allow you to come here. And we did not kidnap her. She came to live here of her own accord, and I left a note." She explained. Xing Wu huffed and crossed his arms, noticing for the first time in a while that he was still dressed in furs. Silently he looked over his shoulder, to see that the glass bridge of immortality was still there, hanging silently in the sky. Wasn't that supposed to disappear? He frowned. There was still something he was missing. One final piece to the puzzle as to why he'd been given this life as his final life; and wasn't that a trip, to be remembering all his past lives. He turned back to Alanna, who was watching him expectantly.

"Lead the way."

The Celestial Palace had grown, but Xing Wu still found himself familiar with the halls Alanna led him through. By design, he suspected, as each step brought with it a fresh wave of memories. Having dinner here or there, with various cultivators. Arguing politics in a conference room. Fang Xu and Celene...

The Xu clan. He could see their mark all over the halls of the palace, and see his friends faces in a few of the guards - their descendants, he assumed. But, to his surprise, Xing Wu didn't feel any connection to them. Back when he was Dei, he'd felt it his duty to protect everyone here, everything he'd built...But they were doing alright. The walls were adorned with finery. The people

- even most those outside the Palace - were healthy and, if not happy, at least safe. The guards seemed well trained and professional, and Alanna had truly blossomed into her own as a ruler. Though her actions were not without conflict or doubt, he could confidently say she had done far better than he would have.

"You're smiling." She said, having stopped in front of two large double-doors, turning around to beam at him. Xing Wu reached up and touched his face.

"Am I?" Alanna did not directly reply; instead, she swung open the doors to reveal what had once been his office. It was just the same as in his memories save for one difference. His old spear had been placed upon his desk. He recognized it; it wasn't just a replica, either. He walked over and grabbed it. It felt heavy. Like it didn't fit his hand anymore. And the weight of the bridge once again pressed itself upon his mind - Xing Wu looked out the great glass window behind his desk to see it floating out there, still gleaming in the sunlight.

"We managed to gather all the shattered and missing pieces, with the aid of some powerful spiritual beings. Reforging it took millennia." Alanna explained. He turned around to face her, only to find her kneeling before him, holding up a crown. Her crown. "You have returned, My Lord. This is rightfully yours." And suddenly it all began to click into place. What this life had been about. What he had been missing. Xing Wu reached forward and grabbed the crown from her outstretched hands.

"I named you my successor, did I not? Alanna." he said, placing it back upon her head. It felt freeing. Chains that bound him shattering completely; a weight off of his shoulders. She looked up at him quizzically, and he knew he was smiling. "I am not Dei, Alanna, nor will I ever be again. The memories are returning, but I am no longer the man you remember. I closed that path with my own hand, and walk a new one by my own as well. You are the Empress, and it is I who should be bowing." This seemed to alarm Alanna as she shot to her feet, the guards behind her shifting uncomfortably. Xing Wu's smile grew wider. "But I will not. Not yet. I know not which path I truly walk now, nor where it will lead in the future. But I do know this," he began, gripping his spear and turning to face the window. The bridge still gleamed outside. And he spoke once more; but this was no longer directed at Alanna.

"It will be no other path but my own."

And he hurled his spear with all his might, his very soul roaring out in glee. The bridge shattered as the spear pierced it, power flooding through Xing Wu as shards of glass erupted into nothingness, following the thrown spear into the sky above, where it continued to gleam a pure, white light. And he laughed. A great, freeing laugh that spoke of all he had endured, and the simple lesson he had been taught. And a goal entered his mind, one that had been chasing him all the way through his lives.

Fang Xu and Celene had left to go become gods. He would beat them there. After all, he'd made a promise to punch someone.

It was only a few days later when Xing Wu darkened the woman's doorstep one last time. His gleaming spear still shone in the sky above, only visible when night had fallen and the Lunar Star had risen. And she was waiting for him.

"Thank you," he said, the moment she opened the door, eyes wide. "For helping me through my lives. I do not believe we have been properly introduced. My name is Xing Wu." The woman smiled. It was a beautiful smile, and did something funny to his heart. He didn't know if this was love, or gratitude, but he wanted to find out. He owed it to her to at least pay a visit, for all she had done for him; even if her presence had been but a fleeting moment to her immortal life.

The woman smiled.

"Inesa. My name is Inesa."

Pride swelled my heart as I looked at the spear floating in space, gleaming with a pure white light and carrying with it the full weight of Xing Wu's fully realized Dao. It was still growing. It would still grow for as long as he lived. With careful fingers I reached out and grabbed it; Xing Wu's cry

of defiance, that he would follow no other path but his own, including mine, resonating within my ears the moment I did.

It dared me to try and tame it, change it.

I pinned it in the night sky, for the entire Realms to see. And I welcomed Xing Wu, the first Dao Progenitor.

2.8 The Plus One

It was amusing to me, how the first Dao besides my own to fully manifest in the Four Realms was the Dao of the Warrior – just a bud though it was. The warrior who led his people away from its city. The warrior who stood before the Shadow. The warrior who battled the sea his whole life. The warrior who studied in his room while his body was weak, sharpening his mind. The warrior who stood alone, and fought through the strange, hidden realm.

Xing Wu. Star Warrior. I find the name ironic.

His Dao fleshed itself out more and more in the years following him throwing off his restraints, especially when he went out across the lands, seeking challenges of all sorts; be they fights against angels, other immortals, or simple challenges of the mind. That had been what his lives had been all about, after all. Finding things that were his. But, more importantly, tossing aside things that were not truly his own. Even as Dei, had he managed to gain immortality in that life, he would have eventually set aside his crown and wandered off to pick fights and grow stronger in the only way he knew how.

By immersing himself in chaos.

Similarly ironically, in the years following the manifestation of his Dao, he significantly calmed down about the whole 'rejection' thing. In fact, he calmed down a lot in general, no longer the quiet, angry man he'd been as Dei. One didn't need to fully reject something else to realize their own potential; that was simply how he worked. I had seen it within him – his initial rejection had to be that strong, in order to not tread the same path as before. It got to the point he actually felt embarrassed about it, the feeling popping up within him whenever he had a discussion with Inesa about the Dao, or he and Fu Hao sparred. Now that he was an immortal he was far more open to spiritual beings, and Fu Hao delighted in having someone actually able to challenge her.

It didn't take too long after that for a few others to hang their own Daos in the sky.

Two hundred years after him, Inesa quietly hung her Dao of Hearth and Home beside his. Hers shone far brighter, as she was more powerful and had quietly deepened her understanding of what the two words meant by hanging around with Xing Wu. The third was unexpected, yet similarly expected, and had appeared just beside Inesa's not but a day later.

Ariel, Goddess of the Wind, and Keeper of Secrets.

I watched her hang her Dao in the sky, and she giggled at me when I stuck my tongue out at her.

"Alright. Keep your secrets," I told her with a smile. She vanished in a puff of wind, and I turned away. The wind was everywhere. The wind heard everything. Yet ironically, it could be trusted to keep secrets. Very different than the sayings of my past lives.

Time passed all too quickly, however. Hundreds, then thousands, then tens of thousands of years flew by in the blink of an eye. The Realms expanded. Seeds matured, nearly ready to be spread. People and gods alike grew. And the time for the meeting drew dangerously close.

Yet I had no one to take with me.

“Randus, would you quit hovering?” I demanded as I strode through the halls of Elvira’s palace. The butler god wrung his hands and backed off a bit, bowing his head as the tea he had been trying to give me vanished entirely. He truly had been too clingy; hovering over my shoulder like a lost child. I understood his nervousness, but still. Enough was enough.

Heaving a sigh I continued on, scratching my chin as I stepped out onto a balcony overlooking the grand court. My daughter was currently holding an audience there, listening to the grievances of a few young gods with a bored expression on her face. Behind her Gilles stood stock-still, his shadows pooling at his feet. The poor deity of shadows was listening intently to what she said, and I could see his decision welling up within him – but he had yet to act on it. One hundred thousand years, and he had yet to act on the desire to court my daughter.

Not going to lie, I was kind of disappointed. Though I did understand his hesitation. She was in a...peculiar situation at the moment.

Her energy was chaotic. All my children’s energies were chaotic. Keilan, Elvira, Reika, and Alexander were nearing the manifestation of their sub-domains and thereby realizing their personal Dao...they were so close, in fact, that I found I would be unable to bring any of them to the meeting. Being around that many powerful beings would do far more harm than good to their development, not to mention how the revelations involved might shake their cores.

Which threw my original plan to bring Alexander along right out the window.

“What am I going to do?” I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. I only had a few years left before the date, and my list of potential “plus one’s” was dwindling rapidly.

“You could bring me, Madam,” Randus said.

“No, no. I know you don’t want to go, even if you say that.” I muttered. “Plus, I can see it will not be good for you. If it won’t benefit any of my children, I just won’t bring any,” I grumbled. That wasn’t the issue though, the issue was that the meeting would be actively detrimental to most potential candidates. Though I couldn’t see what would happen or who I would meet, I could see that much, at least.

Xing Wu was out of the question; he’d made a promise to punch me next time we officially met, and by Me I planned to hold him to that. Not even to mention that he was sparring with Kei right now, the nine-tailed fox doing her absolute best to keep away from him. He was growing into an absolute monster of a warrior...though he desperately lacked properly powerful foes to fight. Kei wasn’t an option either.

What about Fu Hao or Stilicho, my angels? No, that wouldn’t work. Those two were similarly out of the question. Even though I’d managed to beat some of their zealotry out of them, they could still be a bit too intense. Inesa wasn’t...no. I couldn’t bring her. Thyia? The dark goddess?

I hummed to myself and peered through space, my gaze falling on the dark goddess. She was currently on probation, helping Reika tend to her garden. The dark goddess was scowling at a flower, arms crossed as she observed the flow of energy within the plant. ...no. She was close, but not quite. I’d rather she stay. Speaking of, maybe Morgan...?

I turned my attention to Morgan’s cell, where it sat, playing with a bit of primordial chaos. Its eight spidery limbs worked in tandem, twisting energy to form a new body – but it apparently wasn’t satisfied with the result of the clear core it made, for Morgan scowled and promptly shattered it, returning it to the uncontrolled building blocks of creation. No, not Morgan. Creating a People was taking more effort than it had expected, and while Morgan might benefit from coming, it would benefit more from staying.

With a single blink a thousand images flashed before my eyes, peering through space to catch a glimpse of all sufficiently powerful beings in my Realms. Not a single one was *perfect* for bringing along. The one who was closest was Aerial, but even she wasn't ideal. *Barring anything else, I'll bring her.* I decided, though it set my gut to twisting uncomfortably. Ever since she'd become a goddess of secrets as well as winds, her future had become more murky to me. Which wasn't a bad thing, but I got the instinctual feeling bringing her to the meeting would be one secret too many...or, perhaps, go against her Dao in some way.

I sighed once again, straightening up, casting one last glance at Elvira. She may have been listening to the god of tides, but I could feel her attention upon me.

"I'm going to the base of the Life-Giving Tree, Randus, to do some gardening. Would you mind checking on the outer planets? I'd like to make sure things are stabilized." I told him. Randus bowed to me and promptly vanished. With but a thought I vanished from Elvira's palace and reappeared at the base of the Life-Giving Tree, peering through the thick bark to the seeds that lay beneath.

I needed to clear my head. Anguishing over who to take would do nothing to solve the actual problem. And these seeds were just about ready...the meeting itself would take place for an unknown period of time, and I didn't want to plant them until I got back and could oversee their growth.

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Grumbling to myself I knelt and dug my fingers into the soil, wrapping my power around one of the seeds, trying to estimate the density of its aura, the weight of its existence, the time it might need to grow...

The place I had laid out for these seeds to be planted in was already prepped, but...

“The best time to plant a seed is twenty years ago. The second best time is now.” An unfamiliar voice said from just beside me. I jumped a little, genuinely startled by her sudden appearance – and then startled by the fact I *had* been startled. Immediately I locked eyes with the little avian standing beside me, her expression blank and oddly serious for one so young; she couldn’t be older than twenty two, practically a baby, with a soul that shone with a steady, blank light. Everything about her screamed of painful neutrality, from the glasses she wore over her green eyes, fixated as she was on the seed I had wrapped my power around, to her mottled brown wings, to the short-cut hair pulled into a rough pony tail.

The girl frowned and looked up at me, pushing her glasses up her nose – only to freeze in place the moment she met my eyes, her entire being stunned into silence.

Now that I was looking at her, I could clearly see the path she had come from. There was a little village not but an hour’s walk away from the base of the Tree, that had recently become home to a series of formation experts seeking to study the Life-Giving Tree itself. She had grown up in that village and walked over here to begin her own studies, using the formation experts as an excuse, when I had appeared just in front of her. She shouldn’t have been able to notice me. And besides –

Where was her future? I could see where she had been, but not where she was going. She might be the only being in the entirety of the Four Realms I could not see the future of.

“Who are you?” the girl asked.

“I should be asking you.” I replied, feeling my consciousness multiply in strength and ability as my true body focused its power into this incarnation. It took only a split second to keep picking out inconsistencies in the girl’s existence. Her glasses were no simple glasses – formations had been etched into the rims, giving them a comprehensive ability and enabling her to see more than should be possible. It was also made in a manner completely foreign to the Four Realms, the runes inscribed upon them in no way similar to most things in the Physical Realm...they shared some

similarities with a civilization growing on one of the outer planets, but she should have, in no way, been able to contact them.

Plus, her work was far more advanced. The density of energy that flowed through the Tree was far too much for any of the Fae's abilities to peer through; let alone the ability to pick out the Seeds.

"I am-"

"One second, sorry, this is taking a bit longer than it should." I interrupted with a frown, narrowing my eyes at the girl. She stared at me unflinchingly, her soul mired in a sort of black apathy marred only by a little hint of curiosity that came from her truesoul. Natural curiosity. Yet her truesoul was oddly shaped...it looked like a fresh one, and bore a tiny mark of my touch, however...

My true body turned its full attention upon the girl, and suddenly I was no longer an incarnation. The girl stumbled a bit at the pressure my full presence put upon her, but it was no more than a stumble. I spared one moment to raise an eyebrow at her as she turned pale, then peered closer.

Something was fuzzing up my vision. Parts of her soul were hidden from me, and not in a way that seemed natural...ah. Like pulling aside a curtain, there was a pop and all of a sudden a string was reveal, tied about her truesoul. It stretched high, high up into the sky, leading...outside the Realms.

"What in the world...?" I muttered, for the first time spotting the ball of energy floating just outside my domain. No, wait – it wasn't just energy. It was...memories, too? Though I couldn't view those. The ball was invisible to every sense except my eyes; and even then, I could barely make it out. If I blinked, I'd lose sight of it. I narrowed my eyes and turned my attention back to the girl, who was watching me carefully, but still apathetically.

“Would you happen to be the curator of this tree?” she pressed.

“No, but also yes.” I said, rubbing my chin thoughtfully.

“I apologize, but my vision is slightly limited here. I have not yet grasped the intricacies of forging with qi. Nor the true limitations of formations. But by my best estimate, the seeds are on the brink of maturity. If they wait much longer to be planted, it will be detrimental to their growth.” The woman said. I hummed, turned, and promptly yanked the eight new seeds out of the Tree. Across the Four Realms, various other incarnations of mine similarly pulled the seeds of the River, Mountain, and Valley out of their respective areas as well.

She was right. I knew she was right. I had just been stubborn about it, and controlling. I wanted to watch over the seeds’ growth myself, and not knowing how long the meeting would take delayed my plans. It was a silly worry. My children would do fine, and having some additional responsibilities would take their minds off of my absence.

“Where will you plant them?” the girl asked.

“There is a spot I have in mind. I – are you ok? Most people would not be so calm about the situation you find yourself in.” I asked gently, stowing the seeds in my robes pockets meeting the girl’s eyes seriously. Her expression twitched exactly once, apathy transforming to hurt within her, then vanishing once again.

“I am fine, thank you.” A lie, but I let it slide. “Just some bad memories today.” I hummed again. Then came to a decision.

“If you wouldn’t mind, come with me please.” I said softly. The girl did not verbally respond but I still felt her consent; and we teleported away, to the middle of the false void. She blinked and

staggered a bit at the sudden teleport, her wings flaring to stabilize herself. Though I said my children would do fine in watching the seeds grow, I would plant this first batch myself. In later iterations of this process I would let my other children do so, but as this would be the first, well. If it failed, then it would be my fault.

“That was a long teleport.” The girl said, looking back over her shoulder at the Realms. Her eyes widened and she averted her gaze, pressing a hand against her forehead. My power wrapped tighter around her; her cultivation was fairly advanced for her age, but the false void was a difficult place to be. However, she was handling this exceedingly well. My suspicions grew.

“I apologize, I do not think I ever got your name.” I said, looking out at the plot of seemingly empty space. Raw energy pooled here, forming a sort of...vase for the seeds to grown in, before I transplanted them to something more permanent and allowed them to grow fully.

“I am The Mad Scientist.” The girl, the Mad Scientist, said, her voice coming across as staticky and almost...distant, to my ears. I furrowed my brows, even as I waved my hand and sent the seeds hurtling out into space, where they buried themselves in the energy alongside the other seeds my incarnations tossed out. Almost immediately the entirety of the Four Realms began to shift and change, the seeds cracking open, little buds beginning to form in the pool of energy. I expected there to be another hundred or so years for the next big change to them, but already I could feel the growth of the Realms increase.

“The Mad Scientist? That is a strange name.” I said.

“No, I said the *Mad Scientist*. How do you know that name?” she countered, showing true emotion for the first time. A spike of fear and panic flooded her, but I tuned that out as I processed her words. There was another name, buried under the title of Mad Scientist, but it was secondary. Irrelevant compared to what that title meant.

“I see. The title you have given yourself – or is it a title someone else bestowed upon you? – is overriding the name your parents gave you. Does it have something to do with the extra memories

you carry?" I asked, looking back up at where the ball of energy and memories still was, floating out in the Void. It took a little bit of searching to find. Mr. Blue Boxes had to have something to do with this. I could feel it.

"How did you...? No one has figured that out so quickly." The Mad Scientist said, voice shaking.

"Perhaps not. Who are you? I can peer at your soul, and I get mixed signals as to how old it is. Twenty thousand? A hundred thousand? Give or take? I am uncertain. No, wait...there is an explanation." I muttered, realization dawning upon me. The foreign runes. A soul that should be fresh and brand new, this being her first life, having memories and power that existed outside of my Realms. It was practically slapping me in the face.

She, herself, was foreign. From another universe. But not in a way similar to what the rogue spirit had been.

"I...I..." she stammered. Fear colored her emotions in a sickly yellow, swiftly overtaking the black apathy.

This had Mr. Blue Boxes written all over it.

Ding!

Discovery!

You have discovered a Monkey Wrench in your universe! They are unique souls, unbound by the typical methods of reincarnation or afterlives found across the multiverse. Instead, in each new life, they travel to a new universe, acting as messengers and a method of spreading information and power. They carry with them bits of other universes, helping to create some much-needed diversity.

Due to their nature, they are unpredictable to most beings, save for those at the peak of their power. Such as myself. Hence the term Monkey Wrench, as they can often mix up even the best laid deific plans.

This one's designation is the Mad Scientist. Be kind to her.

Show more

A soul that had seen multiple universes...the timing was suspicious. I felt myself smile. It seems I might have accidentally found my plus one. Just in time, too.

"Do not be afraid. On my oath I wish you no harm, little one." I told her softly, genuinely. The words soothed her fears, yet she still furrowed her brows in suspicion of me. I spoke again, before she could question me. "My name is Statera Luotian, Origin Deity of the Four Realms. When I speak truth, it is known." This got an appropriate reaction of shock from the strange girl, who sucked in a breath at the revelation. I smiled. Got her. Curiosity wormed its way to the forefront of her emotions. "Now, I believe we have some things to discuss. *Do* take care of me."

2.9 Leaving

The gods had gathered before me for my farewell, milling about in the grand hall of my palace. Or, at least, some of them. I hadn't wanted everyone to know I was going to be leaving for a time, so only those who needed to know were present. That included a few of the major elemental gods, such as Aerial and Argent, as well as the Big Four, Kei, Randus, and a few others. Fu Hao and

Stilicho were busy elsewhere, but I had long since informed them of my departure, while the Mad Scientist stood close to my side, looking incredibly interested as she adjusted her glasses.

Magic flashed through them, giving her a glimpse of what my children truly were. They were a marvel of formation magic, though like all things they were imperfect. Ironically, it had been I who suggested she add a secondary filter to the glasses in order to protect her eyes from the sheer power my children radiated. Though her cultivation had grown as her natural curiosity drove away some of her apathy, likely due to my presence, she was still far from powerful enough to be able to withstand my children's auras on her own.

Especially now, with how powerful they were growing.

"How long will you be gone?" Alexander rumbled, the great dragon curled up on himself while the god of fire and goddess of water clung to his horns. He gently shook his head, and the two giggled at each other.

"I am uncertain." I told him. "It could be a thousand years. Could be less." In truth I expected it to be no more than ten, as there had been no objection to bringing the Mad Scientist along, but there was no telling with Mr. Boxes. A being that powerful could probably warp time to the point that no one would even notice I was gone. I doubted that would be the case though, as this seemed like a great stress-test. How would the Realms react to my presence well and truly vanishing from it? How would it fare without me?

The thought made me a little nervous, but I trusted my children. To some extent. I was more nervous about it than I should be, to be completely honest.

"Quite the motley crew you have collected here," the Mad Scientist muttered. "These must be the First Gods. Fascinating. I've never met any so...young." I shot the avian an amused glance. I'd kept a close eye on her for the past few years, to ensure my choice was, indeed, not incorrect, and had frequently sought her out for advice and simple conversation. Not that her advice was really useful for myself. Her perspective was unfortunately limited, though she did have her moments.

In truth, she was just...refreshing. She simply didn't care I was an Origin Deity. Or, perhaps a better way to put it was she found my existence and presence fascinating, an object of study, rather than some great being. Add to that I couldn't perceive her future, even if I could predict it, and she provided a touch of chaos I had not realized I so dearly missed.

"And who is this one, Mother, that you would take them along with you?" Keilan asked, peering at the Mad Scientist but politely not trying to peek through the perception filter I had placed over her. At her own request, she wanted to remain anonymous from my children. I did not blame her for such a desire; the attention of the gods could be a cruel thing, especially for one with secrets such as hers.

"We have been over this, Keilan." I said firmly, narrowing my eyes at my child. Frustration was welling up within him, and while I could see it would soon reach a precipice and he would level out emotionally, it was still making him far more irritable than he should be. "I cannot take you right now. She, however, may provide some of the insight and perspective I need." Keilan grumbled a little but backed down, Reika patting him on the back and whispering something that had him perking up just a tad.

"I know," Keilan sighed after a moment. "I just cannot contain my curiosity. Going so far as to hide her karma from me? That is quite interesting." I just smiled at him. I hadn't hidden any karma from Keilan; he was trying to peek into her future and far past, neither of which existed to him. All he saw was what her karma already showed – a twenty five year old Avian girl of middling power, even for a cultivator. It was funny, I had placed a perception filter over the Mad Scientist, but in this case the truth was harder to believe than any fiction I might conjure. So some things could still be seen.

Keilan just wouldn't recognize her without me directly pointing her out.

"Perhaps when I get back, I will allow you all to study my nature." The Mad Scientist mused. "Assuming, of course, you allow me to study you as well. I have multiple theories I wish to test, having such powerful beings before me." The way she said *powerful*

seemed odd to me. Almost as if she meant *will be powerful*, rather than are powerful. It made sense, in a way, as we all still had much growing to do, but...it felt odd for her to refer to my children as such.

“Theories? About what?” Gilles asked, popping his head around Elvira with furrowed brows. His interest was palpable, and Elvira rolled her eyes fondly at the man.

“That is for another time.” The Mad Scientist deflected, looking up at me expectantly. I nodded at her and clapped my hands, drawing all attention back to me.

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“It is time. Now, you all behave, alright? Don’t go throwing any parties now that Mom and Dad is leaving for a time; or, if you do, I expect you to clean up your mess. Tend to the seeds – “

“We understand, Father,” Elvira said with a slight bow.

“You can trust us.” Alexander agreed.

“I do.” I said with a sigh, glancing up at the timer Mr. Boxes had placed in the air above me. Five seconds. “I love you. See you soon.”

“Have a safe trip,” Reika and Keilan both said, and as soon as the timer hit zero, I vanished from the Four Realms.

My connection to the Realms was cut in an instant and I stumbled, pressing my hand against my forehead at the sudden lack of sensation. And for the first time in millions of years, I experienced silence. Pure, blissful silence. No prayers. No dreams. No people, tapping into my Dao and power to fuel their own desires. No gods doing the same. It was just me and my thoughts. My Dao. My soul.

“Are you ok?” the Mad Scientist asked, concerned.

“Shh. Just...let me enjoy this for a moment, please,” I asked, voice cracking a little as I stepped forward, tears prickling the corners of my eyes. I’d almost forgotten what it was like to not hear anyone else around and for a long moment I let it flow through me. Then, quietly, just to be sure, I reached out for my connection to the realms, grasping for it like a blind man, and felt it clinging to my soul. But it was quiet. Muted and weak, still there, just...silenced. Satisfied my connection had not been truly severed I let it drop and turned my attention to the surroundings.

We stood in a round room, the walls made of a white marble with black veins, twelve arches of silver and gold equidistant from each other along the walls. Flags flew over these arches, a round table of grey stone sitting in the very center, twelve plain chairs pushed up against it. No one else was present, and I glanced behind me at the archway I had appeared under, a flag flying above it just as the others.

It depicted a simple mountain, river, valley, and tree upon it. The flag of the Four Realms. Did the flag depict the shape of each, respective universe? I looked closer at the other flags, examining them and trying to discern their meanings.

I had no idea what any of them meant. One had seven horizontal lines on it, layered over each other like the layers of a cake. Another had a single, big O, while another had multiple little o’s, one seemed covered in binary, another had a circle with a line through it, while another still had an image of a crown, whatever that was supposed to mean. Without seeing the other origin deities,

discerning their godly domains, and discussing the nature of their universes, I doubted I would be able to figure out what their flags meant.

Perhaps one created a universe like my old one?

“We are cut off from the natural laws, here,” the Mad Scientist noted, pulling her glasses off and tapping them. I glanced over at her as I circled the table, hands clasped behind my back and robes trailing behind me. What she said was not true. I could still feel them, even if they were muted, though I purposely kept them at a distance so I could enjoy the silence. “Not even my glasses work. I wonder if...[Fire.]” She spoke, and fire erupted from her outstretched palm.

That was no simple magic. The air burned alongside the flame, and I found myself drawn to it. Her expression was smug as she looked over at me, having made it almost all the way around the table. “Universal laws. Words and concepts that stretch beyond the reach of a singular universe. I admit to not being the most knowledgeable on the subject, but I can at least do this much.” She continued, holding the flame aloft for me to see.

It was ruining the quiet, and I decided I didn’t like the way it whispered and shook. Maybe Morgan had been onto something, when it talked about silence and the purity of the Void. I could...hear, better, here. Yet the whispering of the flame insisted I look closer.

It was incomplete. I raised one hand, as if to touch the little flame. It needed to be deeper...my vision narrowed, a power welling up within me as embers swirled in my heart. The room darkened, the ground trembled, the air distorted as heat rolled off of me in waves, the truth of [Flame] - a sharp zap against my spine shocked me out of my trance, jumping a little at the suddenness of it all. Panic raced through me for a moment as I looked the Mad Scientist up and down, afraid I had hurt her with what I had just done – but she was none the worse for wear. In fact, she didn’t even seem to have noticed, toying with her fire as she was.

Frowning I glanced up at the little sliver of Mr. Boxes that had appeared in the air above me, pulsing like a little nerve ending. As always, looking through the boxes it normally spoke through hurt my eyes.

“Your first insight into the Truth should be something deeper than such a tiny flame, fool.” It said, voice audible to me, and me alone. *Truth? What does that mean?* I wondered. Some small part of me knew that Mr. Boxes wouldn’t answer that question, however, and I turned back to the Mad Scientist, who had put out the flame and was now looking about the room. With the whispering fire gone, blissful silence returned. *“The others will arrive soon. Get settled, if you would.”*

Did Mr. Boxes give me time alone, to appreciate the silence? Or is this something it’s doing for all the Origin Deities, and we just have not seen each other yet? I wondered as I approached the table and pulled out my chair.

The moment I touched it, it changed. From the simple white wood it was made of to a velvet armchair, complete with dark mahogany wood around the edges. I admired the craftsmanship for a moment, glancing up at Mr. Boxes’ avatar before settling down into it with a groan. With a snap of my fingers I summoned a similar, smaller chair for the Mad Scientist to sit in, which she took gratefully.

“Are we early?” she wondered.

“I assume we arrived exactly when we were supposed to.” I replied, putting nothing past Mr. Boxes. After another moment of thought I sighed and waved my hand, summoning food and drink onto the table itself. Tea steamed in pots and fresh veggies cut into bite-sized pieces lay on plates, while a few candies, pastries, and other such sweets piled themselves up in wicker baskets.

If this was going to be a long meeting, I would want snacks. And it would be best to leave a good first impression. Excitement bubbled through me as I squirmed in my seat. I was ready. I was more than ready. What would they look like? Who would they be? I bit my lip and fixated my gaze upon the arches around me.

And the first of the Origin Deities began to appear.

2.10 Arrival

As if on cue, a ripple echoed through space like a drop of water in a still pool – and the first of the other Origin Deities arrived, emerging through a portal that appeared in its archway. My breath caught in my throat, and I had to swiftly envelop the Mad Scientist in a bubble of my aura to protect her from the sheer presence of the new arrival.

It was a butterfly. Giant in size, its wings seeming to be made up of primordial chaos itself, the edges fluttering like smoke with each little movement. Its eyes were a thousand different shades, each little section of the compound eyes holding a different element of creation. Each flap of its wings sent the wind to roaring through the little meeting room, its chair twisting itself to appear more as a perch as the great butterfly settled down at the table. Behind it, a flower appeared, a brilliant red rose easily as big as I was tall, pushing itself forward to rest beside the butterfly. I glanced at its flag, which depicted a stylized explosion. The hell was that supposed to mean?

“Pity,” it said, antenna twitching and attention focusing upon me. “I had hoped to be first.” I folded my hands in my lap, tilting my head to the side. Was Mr. Boxes translating, or did we simply inherently understand each other? I got the feeling it was the latter.

“Feel free to add anything you like food or drink-wise,” I said, gesturing to the table. “I am afraid I was unsure on what to expect, so I merely laid out a few of my favorite delicacies from my own universe. The butterfly hummed, its voice simultaneously rattling the room, and soothing it entirely. I could not help but frown at it, keeping my own aura close to myself and the Mad Scientist. Was it trying to bug me, pun not intended? Its aura seemed...abrasive.

“I see. So you were the one to set out the food. I admit I do not have much taste for what you set out, so...here.” With a simple twitch of its antennae, cubes of condensed elemental essences appeared upon the table.

“I would introduce myself, but I believe we should wait for the others.” The butterfly said. “It seems most prudent.” I nodded along, and though I desperately wanted to know more about the giant butterfly and its flower companion, I stayed quiet and waited for the rest to appear. I did not have to wait long.

The next was a skeleton, clad in dark black robes, its hood up. Green flames burned in its eye sockets, black smoke pouring from the spaces between its bones as it settled into its chair, a black-haired woman dressed in similarly fine black robes standing beside him, a katana at her side. Her hair was pulled up in a neat bun, and she glared about the room – until she met my eyes, at which point she paled and immediately looked away. I frowned. What was that about? A quick glance at its flag showed a circle with a straight line through it.

“Try not to lock eyes with the companions, Statera.” The Mad Scientist advised. “Your gaze tends to be...piercing.” Vague, but I accepted the advice and sat back, merely watching.

“Snacks and tea?” the next being to arrive asked. It was an inverted pyramid cast in a white metal, lined with gold and floating mid-air, a singular red light shining from the center. It slowly rotated as it settled above its chair, which morphed to look more like a stand. Behind it floated an orb of silver metal encircled by three rings of blue light that, if I looked closely, were made entirely of binary numbers. This one’s flag, at least, seemed self-explanatory with its binary numbers. Would they be a machine world, then? “We do not require such sustenance.”

“Nor do I,” I told it. “But that does not mean I cannot enjoy them all the same. Add what you wish, or do not.” The pyramid fixated its attention upon me, red light flashing once before it seemed to settle.

“We will not partake.” It said.

“Distrust does not set a good first impression,” the butterfly said.

“It is not distrust...” The pyramid began, but I was distracted from what it said by a voice beside me.

“Psst!” he said in a stage-whisper. I turned my attention to the man who appeared through the arch to my left, dressed in filthy rags with dirt smearing his face. In one hand he held a gourd, while the other tumbled a pair of dice around in his hand. His hair was an absolute mess, too, hanging nearly low enough to block his eyes – eyes that shone with a far more mischievous light. Yet, curiously, he stood *behind* another being; an eight-winged angel clad in gleaming silver armor, that stepped forward as if to take the chair of the origin deity. Their flag was seven lines, layered upon each other. “You got any booze?” the beggar-looking man asked.

“Do not harass the others for alcohol the moment you meet them, Reilly.” The angel said primly, adjusting her armor. Her hair was stark white, a halo of great radiance gleaming from above her head as she moved to take a seat. She reminded me of Elvira in many ways. I furrowed my brows. That...was not the aura of an origin deity. The beggar, on the other hand...

“It is quite alright. Do you prefer whiskey, wine, gin...?” I asked, procuring three different bottles from the sleeves of my robe. The beggar’s eyes lit up as he marched right over to me, his angel sighing and shaking her head.

“I don’t have a preference, but I’m feeling whiskey!” he chirped happily. I tossed him a bottle and he snagged it out of the air, uncorking it and sniffing the contents with a happy sigh.

“I must ask, though, why you are letting your plus one take a seat instead of yourself?” I asked, making the man, Reilly, freeze in place. And suddenly I was acutely aware of everyone’s attention being placed upon me, and the Mad Scientist rubbing her forehead with a sigh.

“I have my work cut out for me with this one,” she muttered to herself. “Subtlety seems foreign to them.” Before I could figure out what she meant by that, Reilly tossed his head back and laughed, marching over to take his seat from the angel woman, who was watching me curiously.

“Good eye! To think my disguise was seen through so casually.” Reilly cackled, lounging in his chair – which transformed to look incredibly rickety yet simultaneously comfortable – and kicking his feet up on the table. With a wave of his hand a litany of other delicacies appeared on the table, including a small fountain of wine.

“I did not even notice.” The pyramid said.

“Notice what?” Another new voice asked, resonating with the crackle of thunder. A stag appeared through one of the portals, followed by a centaur dressed in furs. The stag’s fur was trim and glossy, shimmering as it strutted proudly to its seat; a giant cushion. Multicolored gems gleamed in its antlers, moss hanging from the bones, as it settled down onto the cushion. Its flag depicted a five-pointed star.

“My new friend here saw through my disguise at a glance. Ruined a perfectly good prank.” Reilly drawled, taking a swig of the whiskey I’d given him. He groaned in appreciation, peering into the flask, then shooting me a look and a smile. “And if that’s the kind of whiskey you keep on your person, we are going to be *good* friends.” I chuckled a little.

“Statera,” the Mad Scientist said, tugging on my sleeve. I turned to her with a small smile and a raised eyebrow. Her expression was pained, but not because she was in the presence of so many powerful beings. “You must be more careful with your words. You may see this as a friendly meeting, but I guarantee you not all do. Be careful with what information you reveal; be it about others, or yourself, even if accidentally.” I opened my mouth to object, that I had been careful, but stopped myself.

I hadn't even noticed Reilly's disguise, and as I turned my attention back to the slowly assembling deities, I realized she was right. The skeleton had been quiet this entire time, simply observing, turning its eye sockets toward me occasionally. The butterfly and pyramid discussed something in hushed tones, tension filling the air between the two. And the stag chatted with Reilly. Everyone was tense. No one touched the food I had laid out. I reached out and grabbed a chocolate, popping it into my mouth and chewing slowly. This was supposed to be a collaborative effort, in my opinion, a friendly competition, but it was still a meeting between strangers.

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"Oooh, food!" A new, melodic voice echoed out. The owner stepped through the portal to my right, and my breath was stolen from my throat. She was an elf, dressed in a modest red dress embroidered with gold flowers. Her fiery red hair was done up in an intricate bun, flowers blooming within it, while her brilliant, sapphire blue eyes locked onto the table. Her lips pulled into a smile as she smelled the food; the kind of smile men would go to war for. My mouth went dry – but I managed to pull myself out of the reverie as she sat down, immediately reaching for a slice of roasted meat, popping it into her mouth. She moan in delight, and even that seemed beautiful. "Delicious." She said, and I shook myself.

Beautiful was too simple a word to describe the woman. Her mere presence was *magnetic*.

Behind her another elf stood dressed in a modest purple habit, hood pulled up over her head, silver eyes shining like stars in the night. She met my gaze unflinchingly, and I smiled at the two, glancing up at their flag. It depicted a single, large circle.

"Try some wine," Reilly urged. The beautiful woman beamed at him and summoned a glass chalice – it took a bit of effort for me to look away, toward the other newcomer who had appeared during the commotion. *She drew everyone's attention just by appearing.* I noted mentally, putting a hand over the Mad Scientist's eyes. She, too, had been stunned, and I wrapped her tighter in my aura to protect her.

The other newcomer was a bird. Not just any bird, however, as it perched itself upon the back of its chair. It was maybe the size of me, with four great black wings that, when it stretched them out, seemed to contain entire worlds beneath them. Each feather twisted and turned like nebulae, its eyes burning with the light of suns and supernovas – its beak clacked at me as it bowed its head slightly in greeting. Behind it floated a literal sun, pulsing with life and intelligence. Their flag was a series of stars, connected by strings.

A single flap of the bird's wings had a few brownie-like desserts appearing on the table. Curious, I snagged one, taking a big bite.

It tasted of nebulae and wormholes, of radiation and light, of comets and moons. How are those even flavors? I popped the rest of the brownie into my mouth and raised a hand to the bird, who snagged a few candied nuts with its beak.

“Oho, we are having a feast? Allow me to add to the festivities! This is a meeting between gods, of course we should celebrate!” This time the speaker's voice demanded attention and respect, loud and bombastic without being overly so. He did not so much as step through his archway as emerge from it; his skin a gleaming gold color, six muscular arms emerging from his torso, a gem-heavy crown fixated atop his head. A rich red and purple cape fell from his shoulders, armor of a fine silver fitted perfectly to his muscular body. His eyes were the color of obsidian, and his chair morphed into a throne made of solid diamond as he sat at it, snapping his fingers imperiously.

Food fit for a king appeared upon the table, which expanded to hold all the delicacies that were appear. An entire roasted cow, fruit and meat pies, whole fish, and goblets of a dark brown liquor appeared upon the table, nearly overwhelming my senses with the cacophony of smells. His flag was a crown.

Behind the man a jester appeared. His skin was as white as porcelain, fine furs covering parts of his multicolored clothes. The jester appeared bored, sticking his hands in his pockets and looking up at the ceiling with half-lidded eyes.

“Quite the group of people we have here! I admit to being excited to understand each of you further, and hope to promote good will between our respective Universes.” The king-man said, nodding to each origin deity in turn. He paused upon seeing the beautiful elf, gracing her with a beaming smile, but well and truly froze upon meeting my eyes. “...what beautiful eyes you have.” He said, expression neutral.

“Uh, thanks. Thank you for the food, it smells divine,” I said, unsure how to take that. The king-man nodded to me respectfully, reclining in his diamond throne.

“...gaudy.” Reilly muttered, taking a sip of the new liquor before him. He smacked his lips appreciatively. “But decent taste in alcohol.”

The next to appear did so quietly. Almost slipping by unnoticed as it appeared in its chair. It was a simple ball of light, neither bright nor dim, prismatic beams shooting off of it occasionally. Its plus one was a monster that was far more visually interesting. The faceless, six-legged beast was covered in grey feathers, claws on its limbs tapping the ground impatiently as it twisted its faceless head back and forth, observing without eyes. Wings of crystal floated above the creature’s back, reflecting the ball of light’s, well, light. Their flag showed a flower.

“We should not dirty the Great One’s demesne. It is not our place.” The ball of light intoned. With a single flash the space before its chair was cleaned, food and drink vanishing in an instant. Following suit, the pyramid similarly made its place clean as well.

“If we were not allowed to, the Overgod would have stopped us by now.” The stag pointed out, shaking its head. “Besides, are we not encouraged to mingle a bit here?”

“Hey,” the beautiful elf said, pulling my attention away from the stag and light ball’s conversation. She was leaned over in her chair, extending a hand to me. “I’m Yueya Oshun. Nice to meet you.”

“Statera Luotian,” I said, leaning over as well to shake her hand. Her skin was flawless and smooth – for the first time, I became aware of the few callouses I had built up on my own hands. I was far from ugly no matter what form I took, be it male or female, but compared to this woman I might as well be disfigured.

“We girls gotta stick together.” She teased, winking at me. I blinked and looked down at myself, noticing that I was, in fact, in my woman form at the moment. Before I could say anything else, however, something stopped me. Or, more accurately, *someone*.

“I see the party started without me.” A shiver ran down my spine at this voice, and I slowly turned to look at them.

Fangs that shone in the light. Scales that gleamed with all the colors of primordial chaos. Orange eyes that burned with passion and anger, and large, leathery wings that stretched out menacingly, fire and brimstone burning beneath them. The dragon loomed over its section of the table, every inch of its aura clashing against my own in a shower of proverbial sparks. I narrowed my eyes at the lone being, without any companion, as it lay at its spot at the table, its flag fluttering in a non-existent breeze. It depicted a cracked egg.

“Mm. I prefer my food living.” The dragon said, turning its head away from the feast laid out before it. I bristled but managed to control myself, taking a deep breath and reigning in my aura. This reaction was unbecoming of me, like a child unable to control their emotions, though I still sat up straight and squared my shoulders.

“Interesting change,” Reilly noted, looking directly at me. This time I didn’t have to look down at myself to know what he was talking about; I had shifted forms again, and I knew it. With conscious effort I shifted back to my androgynous form, forcibly relaxing myself. The dragon bared its fangs at me, a low rumble echoing from its throat, but did nothing more, merely looking about the room with apparent disinterest.

No one else seemed to have as visceral a reaction to the dragon as I did, from a quick glance about the room. Though some regarded others just as warily; the butterfly and inverted pyramid, for one, their auras carefully shielded against each other. Perhaps, then, it was not the dragon itself that was an issue, but rather something of our natures? I steadied myself, withdrawing my aura from the dragon's and forcibly relaxing myself further, not willing to play that game.

The dragon, for one, shot me a look that could be mistaken for disappointment, before returning its attention to the ceiling.

Weren't we waiting on one more?

"That will be all." Mr. Boxes said. A quick glance about the room showed most of the others seeming to read something in the air – though in the case of the truly featureless beings, such as the inverted pyramid or ball of light, it was hard to tell. *"Due to the nature of the twelfth deity's creation story, they are unable to attend. Nor have any proper representatives appeared within their universe yet. For now, I will give you all some time to meet and greet one another, after which a proper discussion and break-down of everyone's respective powers, universes, and advancements will be presented. Any questions?"*

I chewed my lip a little, considering what Mr. Boxes had said about the twelfth deity. Could they be, perhaps, asleep? Or had the creation of their universe cost them their life, and as such there was no origin deity to attend this meeting? Theorizing would get me nowhere, however, especially as the others glanced about, shifting in their seats. The Mad Scientist tugged my sleeve as I stood.

"Remember. It is a good idea to mingle, but do not surrender information without receiving something in return." She told me.

"I understand." I told her, patting her head. "You may do as you like. Either follow me, or mingle with the other plus ones. Both will be beneficial for you, I believe," I told her, locking eyes with a few of the attending deities.

Well. I suppose it was time for introductions, then.